



*Supporters view Responsible Care
as hope for the future ...*



Editorial

Responsible Care and Credibility

To help overcome the chemical industry's negative public image, the Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA) developed a program it calls Responsible Care (1), and members of the CMA have agreed to adopt that program in its entirety and abide by its principles. Unfortunately, knowledge of this program among the public and indeed among members of the industry itself appears to be quite limited (2).

The Responsible Care program is unique in its origins, goals, and scope. If universally adopted, the program could change forever the way the chemical industry does its business in the United States and around the world. The program was developed as a means of trying to change the public's perception of the chemical industry from one of ruthless, uncaring ambition, to one of trust, honesty, and credibility. While its origins may have risen to meet short term goals, it has evolved to encompass almost all aspects of how the chemical industry does its business and performs in relation to the community and the environment. Supporters of the program view Responsible Care as hope for the future and, if it is successful, future generations may look back and view the program as its foundation for ethical business practices. Some environmentalists who oppose the program believe Responsible Care to be a smoke screen behind which it is business as usual.

Responsible Care consists of a set of guiding principles and codes of management practices. These guiding principles and codes are far reaching in that they address the needs of the community, the manufacture of current and future chemical products, the development of governing regulations, the operation of chemical facilities, the protection of the environment, and the business practices of the industry. The manufacture, storage, disposal, and transport of hazardous chemicals are of vital concern to local communities; in this regard, CMA members have promised openness and free communications concerning the nature and toxicities of their raw materials, manufactured products, and waste. In the planning of new products, there is a preference for manufacturing processes that minimize waste and by-products. The chemical industry has expressed willingness to help in the development of environmental regulations to replace the rigidity of the current system (3). Member companies promise to work with others (presumably government agencies such as the EPA) to clean up toxic materials already present in the environment that resulted from past handling and disposal of hazardous substances, and to operate their facilities in a manner that protects the environment as well as the health and safety of their employees.

Probably the most revolutionary aspect of the program has been the establishment of community outreach programs, especially the convening of community advisory panels (CAPs). CAPs have contributed substantially to increased understanding of environmental issues faced by both industry and community. CAPs are able to express their concerns and to work with industry officials to

maximize benefits to both the manufacturer and the community. Only through open and honest dialog between industry and local communities can the mistrust of generations be overcome. All of this sounds great, so where is the problem?

The problem is one of credibility. Between the chemical industry and the public, there is a long history of mistrust. In fact, in terms of credibility, the chemical industry resides just above the tobacco industry, which is at the bottom of the list (4). The chemical industry is at least trying to solve its problems, whereas the tobacco industry is still in denial. The Community Right to Know Act and the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) have forced cooperation from the chemical industry. A proposed regulation would add chemical-use reporting to the existing TRI. The concept that a community has a right to know everything about the chemicals that are used, transported, or emitted into its environment has been a distant goal for several environmental organizations. The establishment of the Superfund eventually brought regulators and the chemical industry to the table to formulate and design environmental regulations. Credibility is also in question when the behavior of some of the chemical industry lobbyists is considered. The chemical industry, through their lobbyists, wholeheartedly supported attempts by the 104th Congress to dismantle environmental legislation. Critics of Responsible Care who claim that the program is a front have a point when the chemical industry appears to be paying lobbyists to work to overcome environmental regulations while outwardly professing to embrace the principles of Responsible Care (2).

Many corporations are publishing environmental reports (5). These booklets are often beautifully presented summaries of industrial achievements in the area of environmental health. They are designed to improve image, but whether they truly result from improved performance in the area of environmental health has yet to be determined. Unfortunately, television has dulled the watchers eye, and self-promoting corporate advertising is not convincing. Part of the problem lies with the process used to evaluate performance called "self-evaluation". In many cases environmental achievements may be impressive, but the process of "self evaluation" is viewed by environmental scientists and much of the public as a joke that hurts the credibility of the chemical industry. A further problem that weakens the Responsible Care program comes in the form of its voluntary nature. Members are exhorted to make good-faith efforts to attain the goals of each code. Unfortunately, "good faith" is not a process designed to build credibility. The Responsible Care program and its goal of improved credibility appears to be seriously impeded by inadequate accountability.

Judging from the corporate environmental reports, major efforts are underway to rectify past mistakes in dealing with the public and in dealing with environmental issues. Members of the CMA are honor bound to ascribe to the principles of Responsible Care, but it must be pointed out that most of the chemical manufacturers in the

United States are not members. CMA membership accounts for less than 1% of the chemical manufacturers in this country although, in all fairness, this 1% does account for over 90% of the manufacturing capacity.

If the chemical industry wants credibility, a major step would be to instigate a mandatory third party verification process for environmental reports. Corporate environmental reports must become scientific documents with data supporting environmental achievements.

To build credibility and perhaps a degree of self-regulation, there are basically four requirements that have to be met. First, misconduct must be defined and a code of ethics universally adopted by the chemical industry. Second, an independent body must be set up to investigate and verify misconduct within the membership; and third, a separate independent body is needed with power to render judgment and appropriate punishments in the event of transgressions. The fourth requirement is tradition. To be credible it helps to have a long tradition of trust and truthfulness. Through Responsible Care an outstanding code of ethics and behavior has been described for the industry. The code is not universally adopted, but it is a start. Whether the industry can organize itself to construct independent

investigative and punitive bodies has yet to be determined. Once these first three objectives have been achieved, with time, the practice of Responsible Care will become tradition and the rest will be history.

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Environmental Mutagen Society

The 28th Annual Environmental Mutagen Society Meeting will be held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 19-24, 1997. The Environmental Mutagen Society is an international society whose purpose is to engage in scientific investigation and dissemination of information relating to the field of mutagenesis and to encourage the study of mutagens in the human environment in particular, how mutagens may affect public health. The annual meeting brings together scientists from academia, industry, and government to discuss recent findings in the fields of mutagenesis and molecular genetics and their application to regulation and safety evaluation.

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